

Governor Kulongoski issues proclamation designating November 1-7 as SWCD Week

Celebrating Oregon’s soil and water conservation districts

October 28, 2009... For nearly 70 years, Oregon’s soil and water conservation districts have helped protect the state’s natural resources through varied but effective projects and programs that continue to stand the test of time. Those districts are now getting high level recognition as Governor Kulongoski has designated November 1-7 as Soil and Water Conservation District Week in Oregon.

“Successful on-the-ground projects made possible by funding and direction from the districts prove to all Oregon landowners that conservation is good business,” says Oregon Department of Agriculture Director Katy Coba. "There is a higher public expectation for clean water, environmental enhancement, and watershed protection. Districts are conservation leaders in each of their communities."

ODA’s Natural Resources Division oversees the state’s 46 soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs).

“The districts are an essential component of the state’s effort to address conservation needs, whether it involves soil, water, or fish and wildlife habitat,” says administrator Ray Jaindl. “They have played that role since 1940 and relish the opportunity to provide assistance to landowners. This proclamation also gives them a well deserved pat-on-the-back.”

The governor’s proclamation offers a number of strong statements supporting the good work performed by SWCDs over the years:

- SWCDs’ locally elected directors and staff have provided exemplary leadership in implementing natural resource conservation programs across the state
- SWCDs have a long history of being on the leading edge of providing technical assistance and finding financial aid to implement best conservation practices to private landowners
- SWCDs have led the way in developing much of the on-farm infrastructure for Oregon’s irrigated agriculture
- SWCDs are working with private landowners, state and federal agencies, and interested organizations to protect habitats for threatened and endangered aquatic and terrestrial species
- SWCDs are continually searching for ways to implement the best scientific and technological solutions to protect and enhance Oregon’s natural resources while protecting and maintaining local economies

It’s that last statement that truly captures the balance SWCDs seek between environment and economy, recognizing that farmers and ranchers play a critical role in resource management.

---more---

“Districts are always looking for opportunities to protect the soil, protect the water, and provide habitat while maintaining the economic viability of Oregon agriculture,” says Jaindl.

The Oklahoma dust bowl of the 1930s may not have produced agricultural crops, but it did spawn a national effort to dedicate resources for conservation. In 1937, President Roosevelt asked all state governors to promote legislation to form soil conservation districts within their states. These districts were to be local and to serve as liaisons between federal agencies and private landowners. The Oregon Legislature did its part in passing enabling legislation and on February 10, 1940, the South Tillamook Soil Conservation District was established. Currently there are 45 state approved soil and water conservation districts covering all parts of Oregon and one Native American SWCD on the Umatilla Indian Reservation. There are 305 elected directors, approximately 200 employees, and many hundreds of volunteers working to implement the latest science and technology, mixed with common sense, to protect and enhance Oregon’s natural resource legacy.

From the beginning, SWCDs in Oregon have helped landowners design and build water retention structures, and improve farm irrigation systems to increase water use efficiency. Districts help farmers and ranchers implement no-till farming practices to reduce soil loss from wind and water. They also help landowners plant and maintain grass waterways across fields to collect and store any soil that moves from the fields before it can get into Oregon’s streams. SWCDs often help landowners with grant proposals which, in turn, pay for the design, installation, and materials used for a conservation project. Materials can include fencing, piping, shrubs, trees, or seeds. In other cases, SWCD funds are used for outreach and education— paying for workshops that teach landowners a variety of ways to take care of the land and water that sustains agriculture.

While it appears districts are mainly focused on rural landowners, SWCDs play an important role in urban areas as well. Districts in populous Washington, Clackamas, and Multnomah counties have provided a number of programs and projects that may actually reach a greater number of people than those in rural counties.

The special week as proclaimed by the governor coincides with the annual meeting of the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts (OACD) held in Pendleton.

“I would like for Oregonians to reflect on all the work to protect Oregon's natural resources that has been done over the past 60 plus years by so few for the benefit of so many,” says OACD President-elect Charles Boyer of Jackson County. “I would like the citizens-at-large to take a minute and think about the people who are on the ballots every election running for SWCD director positions and give a hearty thanks for all the time and energy they have donated toward the welfare of us all.”

Each district has a success story to tell. Projects aren’t always visible to the public, but the list is growing as landowners take care of the land and water that takes care of Oregon agriculture and our way of life.

For more information, go to the OACD Web site at <www.oacd.org>.

Media contact: Ray Jaindl at (503) 986-4713 or your local SWCD.